

Yes Fat Chicks

After sexism and ageism, here's fatism. Starting at 48 stone.

Night & Day, May 1988

El Cerrito is a rather dull little town in Contra Costa County, about 40 miles from San Francisco. There are small schools, a Safeway store, low-rise apartment buildings, neat front gardens, and a lot of concrete. El Cerrito also has a small police department, used to handling a bit of car crime and over-excited teenagers. The station is less than 100 yards from an apartment block at 10944 San Pablo Avenue, the scene of the most unusual incident local officers can recall.

On the afternoon of November 19, 1996, Detective Donald Horgan and Commander Scott Mosby were informed by the ambulance service that a 13-year-old girl had died in her mother's apartment. They arrived to find no ordinary girl: Christina Corrigan weighed 680lb (48st 6lb), and was naked except for a blanket on the floor of her living room. She was covered in sores and faeces.

She had been dead for only a few hours; the coroner concluded that she had died of congestive heart failure due to morbid obesity. Her mother said Christina hadn't moved from her favourite spot in front of the television for several days. Marlene Corrigan, then 47, explained that her daughter simply found it too uncomfortable to walk around, or even visit the bathroom. When Christina had 'accidents', Marlene would clean them up. When she went out to work every morning, she would leave her a pile of food: eggs, bacon, steak, grapes, granola bars, fruit and vegetables, all in large portions.

The policemen took Polaroids and filed a horrified report. 'The medium-brown carpet was cluttered with household garbage, videotapes, books and magazines, discarded food and drink containers, and was heavily soiled by what appeared to be urine and excrement.' A cursory examination by Scott Mosby 'revealed what appeared to be tissue decay on the thighs and lower abdomen'.

The police visited Marlene the following day at her parents' house. Her father had died eight months before and her mother was in a nursing home, battling the last stages of cancer. Her husband was somewhere in Yemen, but they'd had no contact since he left 11 years before. Mosby and Horgan got a few more answers for their files; Marlene's daughter hadn't seen a doctor for a few years; she hadn't been to school for a term; Chad, her 18-year-old brother said he hadn't seen Christina leave the house for several weeks' and Marlene said she hadn't actually been outside for three months, not since she last visited the pool at the apartment complex.

She said that on the day her daughter died, Christina had complained of a heavy cold. She gave her Tylenol to reduce her fever and went out to buy the iced tea she was fond of. Marlene found her dead when she returned, 20 minutes later. Later, she remembered that Chad had mentioned a few days

before that Christina should probably go to a doctor. She added, 'I guess I was too late.'

Fat people die all the time, but this case reverberated all over the world. Christina Corrigan was truly gargantuan, she was very young, and her mother didn't appear to have done much for her. But there was another reason why this incident was important: several vociferous groups of other fat women, many of them from the nearby San Francisco Bay area, adopted Christina as their 'poster girl', seeing in her as classic victim of fat prejudice. They were the members of an expanding and highly politicised movement promoting the concept of 'fat pride', and they had finally found an anti-hero they could rally round.

Their call-to-arms is based on some core beliefs: that it's okay to be fat; the diet industry is a sham; medicine is riddled with prejudice and it is an unproven premise that weight is inherently unhealthy; and society should value everyone equally, and not deride fat people as figures of fun.

'Christina was the freak of the week, most people's worst nightmare,' says Sally Smith, the chair of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, based in Sacramento. 'People thought it was inconceivable that a human being could get that large. The stigma against her mum was tremendous. The coverage was like a circus sideshow.'

Smith is at the forefront of the movement to expose 'fat-ism', placing its devastating impact on a par with racism and homophobia, although it is closest to ageism. For NAAFA and its many satellite groups, the Corrigan case was what they'd been waiting for – an extreme example of all they were fighting against. They hoped it would be their Stonewall, the small barroom that ignited America's gay liberation. But it hasn't yet turned out that way.

Michael Cardoza is a 53-year-old defence lawyer with a small practice situated above Rubicon, the San Francisco restaurant owned by Robin Williams and Francis Ford Coppola. He's a greyer version of the actor Ted Danson, and clearly fancies himself as a courtroom star. 'I've prosecuted over 40 murders to verdict!' he says by way of introduction. But he's never before come across a case like the Christina and Marlene Corrigan.

Before establishing his own criminal defence practice, Cardoza was a district attorney for 14 years, and thought he understood the mind of a county prosecutor – until he met the prosecutors of Marlene Corrigan. 'They were adamant they wanted a felony conviction and a jail sentence,' he remembers. 'I said: "Are you guys crazy?" From what I knew at that point, if you put what that mother did in perspective with the other cases I've had, where people have killed three or four people, she didn't even come close to that sort of aggravation. But they locked their heels.'

When Marlene came to see him, he found her 'a little strange, very shell-shocked', and it was difficult to communicate the gravity of her situation. This was hardly surprising: as well as her daughter and father, she had recently lost her mother. 'I think the lights were out for a while,' Cardoza recalls. 'Also, in her mind, she'd done absolutely nothing wrong.'

Her defence took a year to prepare, and demanded a specialist team. Early on, Cardoza received a fax from Sondra Solovay, a woman recently out of law school who offered her services for free. She happened to weigh about 26 stone, and was very active in the fat community. She introduced Cardoza to

an entirely new language. 'I say "fat" pretty freely now,' he says, 'but when I set out, I'd no idea about the politics.' Should he use the term 'obese'? No, Solovay explained: obese implies medical problems. 'We're just "fat".'

Cardoza met Corrigan two or three times a week. He found her quiet and genuinely pleasant: 'You've heard the term A and B personalities? Marlene was a B, maybe even a C personality. She really went with the flow of life.' She told him that her daughter dreamed of being a marine biologist – she loved swimming and its illusion of weightlessness. She said her daughter would talk about the prom dance in high school and having something of a normal life. Christina was liked in her early days at school, and her classmates took care of her. Later, they became cruel. Corrigan recalled being on the bus with her and other children saying: 'Here comes the whale, here comes the fatso.' She was tempted to defend her daughter, but Christina said, 'Mum, don't make a big deal. It'll make it worse. I can handle it.' 'They're persecuting me,' Marlene told her lawyer, 'just as they used to persecute her. Her life was very difficult. I gave her a home where she was loved. I gave her love, and I'm being punished. I don't get it.'

Christina Corrigan had always been a big girl: only slightly above average weight at birth (7lb 11oz), she weighed 60lb by the time she was three, and 114lb at five, when she was tested for diabetes, thyroid and pituitary abnormalities, though none were detected. She began seeing a nutritionist when she was seven and weighed 189lb. Then her weight really increased: 205lb in June 1990, aged eight, 224lb six months later. Her medical records suggest she became despondent with the weighing sessions, and insisted on stepping on the scales in private. 'She essentially wasn't seen from 1991,' says Dr Mel Berman, head of paediatrics at the hospital, '(so) it would have been very hard to identify that this was somebody who was at tremendous risk.' Marlene said they tried every diet on the market and sent off for exercise videos. She herself believed she was also about three stone overweight, but whereas she might shed a few pounds on a new, low-calorie regime, her daughter just grew. There was a family history of fat people and, as a teenager, her parents had given her diet pills. For her daughter, she had hoped for a 'miracle'.

Cardoza concedes that Marlene suffered from denial, and she gave in to her daughter's demands for food because this was the only thing that seemed to make her happy. After a while, it became a question of degree. Corrigan told him, 'I didn't see the package – I saw my beautiful daughter.'

One night, Cardoza took his own children to Corrigan's house. 'She treated them better than any non-parent could ever treat two little girls,' he says. 'Some of the time I wasn't even in the room and she didn't know I was watching. You can put on a show for a few minutes, but we were there for four hours and she truly was sweet. I looked through her house and there were things there that you just don't have if you don't care about your daughter – dollies, music boxes, photos, puzzles to play with.'

Cardoza also talked to Christina's teachers, who said that her mother would donate books and bake cakes. One told him that Marlene had asked whether Christina could be put in a swimming class that used a pool a quarter of a mile away so she'd get more exercise.

Cardoza gradually pieced together a two-pronged defence. The first would paint a picture of prejudice, partially from the police, but also from the

medical establishment. 'The police walk in and see a 680lb girl like that – it's a frightening scene,' Cardoza says. 'The cops freak: "Okay, who killed her?" They said they found her in her own faeces and covered in urine. There's no question – she was. But the girl became incontinent when she died. It must have been like a damn breaking.'

He was astonished that the state of Corrigan's house was used as evidence in a case of child neglect. 'So it was a mess – so what? Was she to be prosecuted for bad housekeeping?' He also maintains that the coroner didn't do an internal examination. 'He didn't want to touch her,' Cardoza surmises. 'With racial bigotry, at least most people know they have it. Fat prejudice is just there all the time, practically acceptable. If we see a fat person in a restaurant we point them out and maybe think: "What a slob – why don't they have control?" And yet we have no clue as to who they are, or why they're that way.' The second line of attack involved showing that, even if Corrigan had done more for her daughter, such as further check-ups, there would have been little anyone could have done for her condition. One of the more dramatic parts of the trial came during the cross-examination of Christina's hospital doctor. She was asked to count how many times she had examined her in the first eight years of her life. It took her almost 10 minutes, and then she said 98. Cardoza believes that mother and daughter suffered from what's called 'learned helplessness'. 'What was the point of going back?'

She may also have suffered from Prader-Willi Syndrome (PWS), a condition that went undetected at the hospital, and which one doctor admitted in court to never having heard of. This genetic condition affects about one in 10,000 newborns and is characterised by short stature, possible speech disorders and an insatiable hunger owing to a malfunctioning hypothalamus, that part of the brain which controls appetite. People with PWS also lose sensation in their skin, which may explain Christina's bedsores. 'There are instances where these people are eating and eating, and their stomach's literally popped apart,' Cardoza says, with his tendency towards dramatics. 'The increased (and generally obsessive) interest in food begins around the school-age years,' the Prader-Willi Foundation reports. 'It is not unusual to find families locking their refrigerators, or even the entire kitchen.'

Christina's free access to food, though a little hard to comprehend, was not in itself a criminal act. But on the central issue of neglect, Corrigan still faced two hurdles that might land her in jail. One was herself. 'She would come out with the most stupid things,' her lawyer remembers. 'We'd ask her: "Marlene, were you a good mother?"'

'I was all right.'

'Marlene, "I was all right" is not a good answer to that. But don't lie. If you were a crappy mother, tell them.'

'I was a wonderful mother.'

'Why?'

'I made dresses for her, we played together, we went on diets together...'

The other problem was the photographs of her huge daughter, naked, propped up against their sofa – a classic 'beached whale' image. Occasionally, members of Cardoza's team would rush into his office proclaiming they were bound to win. Cardoza would brandish the photograph and say: 'Do you still think we'll win?', and they would retreat, a little crestfallen. Probably Cardoza's greatest achievement was in persuading the court that the case be heard without a jury. 'A judge would have seen worse than this, but a jury

would have been pretty shocked...The District Attorney would have blown up the photographs and a jury would just be blinded by them. They would have said: "Somebody should have done something, we don't care what you say."

For more specialist scientific evidence, Cardoza called on several medical experts who questioned the dominant value of dieting. Dr Dianne Budd, an endocrinologist at the University of California at San Francisco, introduced the concept of 'yo-yo dieting', the belief that diets will only prove effective in the short term; after a few weeks, the majority of users will actually gain weight. These views are gaining much support, based on the understanding that our weight depends not only on the calories we consume, but how our metabolism makes use of them. According to Dr Budd, 'metabolic changes induced by dieting could conceivably result in a heavy child becoming a morbidly obese child'.

This is possible because it is now believed that a person's weight may be roughly predetermined from birth. We may each have a genetic disposition to achieving and maintaining a certain weight – some scientists believe that we all have several dozen separate genes that determine appetite and metabolic rate (eventually, therefore, it may be possible to partially control our weight through genetic manipulation).

A crucial factor in this balancing act may also be the naturally produced chemical, leptin, which sends appetite signals to the brain. The more leptin we have in fat cells, the less we want to eat and the higher our metabolism and energy expenditure. But, if leptin is reduced in the short term due to dieting, the brain thinks it's being starved and soon demands more food. Thus it's not hard to see why most diets fail over time, or why, in the Corrigan case, each new diet was always regarded as 'the one' where all others had disappointed. Naturally, if even a handful of diets worked consistently, there'd be no need for others. In the trial, Cardoza asked Christina's doctor: 'When you put Christina on a low-fat diet when she was one, and then other diets, did you know what you were doing to her metabolism?' She replied, 'I'm not an endocrinologist.' This was the tragedy: recent studies of weight gain and dieting suggests that only specialists really understand what diets do.

The case ended in February. The judge did not find Corrigan guilty of a felony and did not send her to jail. But she was found guilty of a misdemeanour – failing to seek sufficient medical attention – and she was given a \$100 fine and 240 hours of community service. Cardoza is as proud of this as anything he's ever done, but Corrigan still feels wronged. Two days after I met Cardoza, he left for a holiday in the Bahamas; Corrigan, meanwhile, is very gradually paying back his legal fees from her monthly pay cheque, working in telecommunications for a federal agency in San Francisco.

She feels that the police and the District Attorney just wanted to blame somebody. 'They couldn't accept that some people just get fat and die. And who better to blame than the mother?' At times, she says, it felt like a personal vendetta. 'My daughter was discriminated against her whole life. I certainly did try with her. Truthfully, I don't think there was anything that could have prevented her from ultimate death. Even if she had a genetic disease, there is still no cure.'

Marlene's life hasn't changed much since. Often people recognise her, and she says they are always compassionate. Her punishment entails helping under-

privileged teenagers with their games and computers at a weekend drop-in centre.

'I truly don't think I did anything wrong at all,' she maintains. 'Or maybe it was a lack, what I didn't do. They were asking for 1,000 hours, so I guess I was happy to get 240.' And what does she miss most about her daughter? 'Friendship. Everything, really. We were very, very close. The hardest time now is when I go home from work at night, the time we would spend preparing dinner or doing homework. Christina was a very giving child.'

'Christina Corrigan was an extreme case,' says Sally Smith of NAAFA. 'But the sort of prejudice she and her mother were subjected to happens all the time.' Smith has been executive director for 10 years, a period in which she believes her fat pride organisation has made great strides. NAAFA has only 5,000 members and a budget of around \$250,000, nothing compared with the might of the \$33 billion diet industry. But she has helped people realise that '95 percent' of all diets fail, and, equally important, enabled her members to feel good about themselves. Partly thanks to NAAFA's efforts, she believes, the standard response to fat people is no longer, 'Why don't you just put down the Twinkies?'

Last September, NAAFA issued a writ against the Food and Drug Administration for licensing two diet drugs – commercially known as Redux and fen-phen – which were shown to produce side-effects such as heart-valve failure. Ten days after the writ was filed, the drugs were withdrawn, though many other campaigning groups also take some credit for this.

Estimates of fat people in the US vary, depending on the definition of obesity. According to a recent Harris survey, 76 per cent of American adults were over their weight range for their height – compared with 58 per cent 15 years ago. North Americans are the fattest people in the world, (surprisingly, perhaps, more so in Canada than the US), followed by Europeans: 32 per cent of Germans and 30 per cent of Britons are classified as obese, although some surveys put the British figures as high as 58 per cent for men and 49 per cent for women. Forty per cent of American women, and 15 per cent of men, are believed to be on regular weight-loss programmes. And yet the number of Americans believed to be so overweight that they might have trouble walking has risen more than threefold in the past 30 years.

Sally Smith thinks she knows why we have become a lot fatter since the Fifties. 'In the past 40 years, three industries really blossomed: the diet industry, the television industry and the fast-food industry. There has to be a lesson there.'

She acknowledges that fat people may be more prone to heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, but the answer is healthier food and lifestyle, regular exercise – and more sympathy from doctors and the public. 'A lot of average-size people are couch potatoes,' Smith says, 'but they don't get so much stigma for it. And a lot of fat people are very active. But it's only fat people who are given the message that, no matter what we do, we're going to be unhealthy. Fat people are invested with an air of fatalism: "If I do exercise and don't lose weight, then why bother?" There's been too much emphasis on fat, and not enough on health.'

Fat pride currently takes many forms – protests, petitions, educational schemes in schools and an annual convention, for which a large hotel is taken over by very large people: they go on big marches, have big swims and fat

dances. NAAFA regularly lobbies politicians on healthcare issues, demanding an end to insurance discrimination and asking for longer needles and wider examination tables. It also lobbies airlines to provide larger seats.

NAAFA claims to represent 40 million fat Americans and has many offshoots. There are groups and magazines for fat men, fat couples, parents of fat children, and mid-sized people whom the very fat would regard as very thin. Annually, on May 6, many 'fat-lash' organisations come together for International No-Diet Day (INDD), which this year involved public scale smashes, and a mailing of broken parts to Oprah Winfrey, who regularly advocates new diets on her show.

INDD was actually a British idea, started by the psychotherapist Mary Evans Young in Oxfordshire in 1992. She also formed Dietbreakers which, with the help of Halifax MP Alice Mahon, has campaigned to bring a regulatory code to the diet industry. Her work is being carried on by Catherine Szrodecki and her Alternative Size organisation, which began as a clothes company for fat women. Szrodecki is in close contact with Helen Jackson, a Northamptonshire barrister who is compiling a dossier of fat discrimination cases and is lobbying for an Early Day Motion in the Commons to outlaw size discrimination in the same way racism is outlawed; at the moment, there is no legislation applying to size, and employers who dismiss or refuse to employ people because they are overweight will always cite other factors.

In the United States, there is a growing belief that this is the time when everything comes together for the fat pride movement. The Corrigan case set things in motion, but there are other cultural indicators. *The Jerry Springer Show* regularly features fat people happy to appear in lingerie, and there are now plumper fashion models and more corporeal images promoting the Body Shop.

In his book *Eat Fat*, Cornell University professor Richard Klein argues that we only began regarding fat as ugly and undesirable in the early years of this century, at the dawn of sleek modernism and the emergence of severe fashion lines from Paris. The invention of bathroom scales didn't help either. Previously, fat was sexy and 'voluptuous' trendy – witness Rubens and other classical portraitists. Klein believes that the pendulum may move again: 'Waifs are no longer the thing. Even in *Playboy* there are fatter models, fatter cars.'

'I really think there is a momentum, and attitudes are changing very gradually,' believes Marilyn Wann, editor of *Fat!So?* magazine, a fanzine which combines serious critiques with cartoons and pin-ups of the month. 'The battle is won on an individual level – by one person who stops saying "I should lose weight, I'm ugly", and starts saying "I'm pretty okay the way I am, and I should just go out and live my life."'

Over a coffee and a cream cheese bagel in her local San Francisco café, Wann, who is stocky at 19st, with short, bleached hair, tells of her own transformation. 'Four years ago, I was living the typical closeted life, but then two things happened on the same day. The man I was having a relationship with admitted that he felt embarrassed about introducing me to his friends because of my size and I was refused health insurance because they saw me as too great a risk.'

Since that day, she has campaigned on the issue that size is not inherently unattractive or unhealthy. 'I'm not against the health industry,' she says. 'What I am against is promoting dangerous treatments for something that

doesn't need to be cured. Unfortunately, most people have been conditioned just to want all fat people to disappear.'

At the beginning of this year, she and her colleagues were immensely cheered by a study and editorial in the prestigious *New England Journal for Medicine* which essentially backed their views. It found that for most people, losing weight was like 'an ill-fated New Year's resolution', and concluded that most dieters put on more weight than they lose. Further, the report found that some diet drugs posed far more of a health risk than did putting on weight.

'You can't do this job and not be optimistic,' says Sally Smith. But she admits that the toughest part may not be fighting the prejudice of the public, but fighting the self-loathing of those who consider themselves overweight. 'Most fat people would still give their eye teeth for some sort of magic pill that would make them thin,' she says. 'Most fat people who are unhappy with themselves would rather the ground swallowed them up rather than talk to another fat person. It depressed and shocked me to find out how many of our members took Redux. I thought, what did we do wrong? We kept on saying "No, no, no..." but people are really desperate. If the Christina Corrigan case has taught us anything, it's that the pressure on people from society to conform is really overwhelming.'